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Transnationalism in American History: an International View. Introduction

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FORUM

Transnationalism in American History
An International View

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Introduction

Transnational history emerged in historical studies as one of several approaches – global, world, international, connected – to the study of history challenging both the study of the nation-state as the major unit of historical analysis and the focus on political/institutional actors as the major force of historical change. What sets apart the transnational approach within this context is the emphasis on flows, on the movement of peoples, goods, practices, and ideas across national boundaries, as well as on the local and global connections that such movements draw across regions, states, empires. The focus is on the networks, institutions, ideas, and processes that these connections produce. As it is not confined to a specific subfield or methodological approach, this “way of seeing” the past seems to have great potential for the study of a wide range of subjects, from diasporas and migration patterns to the spread of nationalist ideas, from environmental issues to patterns of consumption and trade networks. On the other hand, however, the lack of a strong methodological paradigm has often contributed to confine “transnationalism” to the realm of fashionable buzzwords, while the outpouring of empirical research moved by a genuinely transnational gaze has been scant in many subfields.

Similarly, the promise of the internationalization of history implicit in transnationalism has been only partially fulfilled and, especially when it comes to the study of the United States, runs the risk of reinforcing the exceptionalist framework it intended to undermine. As Ian Tyrrell has suggested, the more we investigate the flows and exchanges between the U.S. and the rest of the world, the more we might conclude that American history more than the history of most countries is embedded in a dense network of transnational “forces of integration”: the U.S. has been playing a significant role in the framework of contemporary global interdependence and, as a great power, its relation to international law and organizations as well as transnational processes has been peculiar. The challenge for

historians is coping with these peculiarities without falling prey to the old exceptionalist paradigm.

This roundtable aims at discussing the state of the art with a particular focus on the potential and challenges of the transnational turn for practitioners of American history based outside the United States, who have a particular stake in this conversation. In the last twenty years the call for the “internationalization” of the practice of American history led many practitioners to wonder if there is a specific contribution that historians based outside the United States can make out of their specific positionality. This is all the more relevant in the light of the focus on connections transcending politically bounded territories that is characteristic of the transnational turn: to what extent being situated in Europe or elsewhere might facilitate a look at American history that transcends national boundaries?

At the same time, the practice of American history outside the United States deals with methodological implications of transnationalism that are not necessarily related to positionality. As a “way of seeing” history that questions the primacy of the nation-state, transnational history implies a focus on scales: to what extent the focus on local, regional, and global – rather than national – units of analysis has affected scholarship in various sub-fields and/or is likely to do so in the future? The rise of transnational history is indebted to a specific aspect of the “cultural turn”: the emphasis on the “circulation” of ideas and practices across national borders which defied traditional dichotomic patterns (center v. periphery, domination v. resistance). To what extent are cultural studies still a source of inspiration for the future of transnational history?

RSA has asked five scholars with different approaches to the transnational turn and significant experience in the internationalization of American history to answer these questions and share their comments. We thank them for their contribution.
